



## The Clue at Black Creek Farm (Nancy Drew Diaries Book 9)

By Carolyn Keene

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Healthy eating becomes a hazard when a local farm is sabotaged in this ninth book of the Nancy Drew Diaries.

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But during a fundraising dinner showcasing the farm's produce, several people become seriously ill, and tests reveal that the fruits and vegetables are contaminated with deadly E. coli bacteria. Sam swears his produce is clean: E. coli doesn't magically appear in vegetables—it has to be transferred by animals or contaminated equipment. And after the Heyworth's greenhouse is trashed and their chickens are killed by an intruder, Nancy thinks all signs point to sabotage.

Nancy, Bess, and George are on the case. But who would try to ruin a farm? And why?

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

"Narrator Jorjeana Marie captures the essence of what makes Nancy Drew such a timeless fictional icon.... Marie quickens the pace and darkens the tone, giving Nancy's overnight stakeout a decidedly spooky aura. Julie, organic-farmer-turned-saboteur, is especially frightening. This production will ring true for longtime fans and attract new ones. "

—*AudioFile Magazine*, September 2015

#### About the Author

Carolyn Keene is the author of the ever-popular Nancy Drew books.

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The Clue at Black Creek Farm

## CHAPTER ONE



### Food for Thought

"I'M JUST SAYING," MY FRIEND Bess Marvin said as we pushed open the door of the River Heights Community Center, "I don't see how you can get this excited about vegetables."

She was talking to George Fayne, her cousin and my other best friend, who was following behind with an expression like she'd just sucked on a lemon. Ned Nickerson, my boyfriend, was right behind George with an amused look on his face.

"They're not just vegetables," George said, in the frustrated tone of someone who'd been arguing with the same person nearly since birth. "They're organic, sustainable, locally grown vegetables. And fruits too!"

"I just think it's all a little silly," Bess said as we entered the community center gymnasium, which was set up like a banquet hall, filled with round tables covered with red tablecloths and enticing combinations of fresh harvest products. A banner welcomed us: FIRST ANNUAL BLACK CREEK FARM CSA BANQUET AND HARVEST CELEBRATION.

George glared at her cousin. "How is organic farming silly?" she demanded.

Ned spoke up. "I might see what Bess is getting at," he said, giving George a disarming grin. "Not that any farming is silly, but . . . you know, scientists have been trying for years to prove that organically grown produce is better for you, and they've found very little evidence."

"Well, thank you, Dr. Science," George grumbled.

I was saved from further arguing by the interruption of a grinning blond woman with a purple streak in her hair.

I held up my hands in the gesture for truce. “All right, all right,” I said.

“OMG, Bess and George!” the woman cried, appearing out of nowhere to pull the two cousins into a big hug. “You guys are so big now! The last time I saw you, you were kids . . . now you’re young ladies, as my grandmother would say!”

George and Bess exchanged glances and smiled as she slowly let them go.

“Holly,” George said, “we’re so excited that you invited us to this!” She paused to introduce Ned and me to Holly. “Guys, this is Holly Sinclair. She was Bess’s and my awesome Girl Scouts leader and now she’s assistant manager at the community center.”

Holly shook each of our hands excitedly. “I’m so happy you could come!” she said, her cheeks flushed. “Black Creek Farm CSA is doing some really good work, trying to change the way our food gets grown,” she continued, growing serious. “They just need some more support from the community. So I convinced them to throw this dinner so people can taste their food!”

“Holly, I told you,” Bess said teasingly, “I like organic farms and all, but we’re not exactly the culinary decision makers in our families. And my mom really likes the Stop-N-Go,” she added. “Especially since they put in that Starbucks.”

Holly shook her head, her dark eyes shining. “Your mom probably wouldn’t like it so much if she knew where all that mass-produced food was coming from, or what it’s doing to the environment,” she said. “Come on, guys, have a seat with me.”

Holly led our small group to a nearby table, where we all pulled out chairs.

“Soooo,” Holly began, sliding into a seat next to George, “you must know that the produce you buy in a grocery store isn’t all from around here, right?”

“Of course,” Ned said. “But that goes without saying. Not every climate will be able to produce every fruit or vegetable there’s demand for.”

“That’s true,” Holly agreed, “but do you think people really consider where their food comes from, when it’s so shiny and easy to buy at the supermarket? Maybe that orange was picked before it was ripe and flown in on a cargo jet, or else trucked around the country using tons of fossil fuels and releasing all kinds of toxins into the environment. But if people stopped and thought about eating locally, maybe they’d select an apple that was grown down the road—perfectly ripe and much easier to transport.”

Ned sighed. “Right,” he said.

“Local food usually tastes better too,” George pointed out. “Because local farmers don’t pick their produce until it’s ready. Produce that’s trucked in has to be picked much earlier, and that affects the flavor.”

Holly smiled at her. “Exactly,” she said. “And we haven’t even touched on organic versus conventional produce, and how many toxins are released into the ecosystem by conventional fertilizers and pesticides.”

Ned spoke up. “But scientists haven’t found much of a nutritional difference between organic and conventionally grown food,” he said.

Holly shrugged. “That’s true,” she said, “but we don’t have to look very hard to find the damage that conventional farming does to the environment.”

Bess thought a moment. “Even if I can see the logic in what you’re saying,” she said, “I don’t do the grocery shopping, Holly. My mom does it, and she’s big on bargains.”

Holly nodded slowly. “Bess, all I ask is that you listen to the presentation tonight, and if you’re impressed, if you like the quality of the food we serve, you mention us to your mom. Or pass on some flyers I’d be happy to give you.” Holly turned from Bess to look at George, Ned, and me. “That goes for all of you,” she said.

I glanced from George to Ned. George was nodding enthusiastically, and even skeptical Ned gave Holly a small smile. “Fair enough,” he said.

“Sure,” I agreed. While I didn’t always eat organic, I definitely believed in being environmentally responsible. And everything Holly had said made sense.

“Oh, look!” Holly pointed behind my head at a tall, gray-haired, and bearded man. She stood up and waved, and the man turned to her and nodded. “That’s Sam Heyworth, the man of the hour.”

“Who?” asked Ned.

Holly smiled. “Sam’s the founder and owner of the Black Creek Organic Farm and CSA.”

“So what is a CSA, exactly?” I asked. The term was familiar, but I wasn’t totally sure what it meant.

Holly’s eyes sparkled. “I’m so glad you asked! CSA stands for ‘community-supported agriculture.’ Do you know how a CSA works?”

I shook my head.

“It’s basically a way to help keep small farms in business, and help people who live in the suburbs get access to fresh, local, in-season produce,” she explained. “If your family joined, for example, Nancy, they would pay an up-front fee for the whole growing season—June through November. And every week during that season—or every other week if you bought a half share—you’d come to this community center to pick up the freshest, most in-season veggies and fruits that grew on the farm that week.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Picked that week?” I asked. “That’s pretty fresh.”

Holly nodded. “Right off the farm, my friend. It’s as fresh as it gets.”

I glanced up to see the bearded man Holly had identified as Sam Heyworth headed our way, followed by a woman about his age with short blond hair. Holly looked up at them and smiled.

“Sam can tell you everything you want to know about the CSA,” she said cheerfully. “Black Creek Farm means a lot to him, doesn’t it, Sam?”

Sam walked up to the table and smiled down at Holly. “You know it does,” he said, looking around at me and my friends. “Hello. Friends of Holly’s, I assume?”

George’s eyes twinkled. “Holly was our Girl Scouts leader,” she said. “She won’t stop talking about your farm and CSA.”

Sam chuckled. “Well, I’m flattered,” he said. “Running Black Creek Farm is a dream of mine. I gave up a partnership at my law firm to build it.”

Ned raised an eyebrow. “So you were a lawyer, and now you’re a farmer?” he asked.

“Right,” Sam replied. “And I was a stressed-out, unhappy man, frankly, but now I’m”—he stopped and turned to look at the blond woman, who’d come to a stop beside him—“very content,” he finished. “Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to introduce my wife, Abby. She’s given up a lot to support me in pursuing this dream.”

The woman turned to me and my friends with a warm smile, her eyes crinkling at the corners. “Hello, everyone,” she said. “I hope you’re hungry!”

“We’re starving,” Bess promised.

Abby and Sam laughed. Sam glanced up, catching the eye of a thirtysomething man with short brown hair and boxy black glasses. He raised his hand, waving the man over. The man nodded, then gestured for a very pregnant woman with long red hair to follow him.

“This is our son, Jack, and his wife, Julie,” Abby explained. “They’re from Chicago, but they’ve been visiting us while they house-hunt in the area.”

“Hi,” said Jack, stopping a few feet away and looking from face to face with a quizzical look.

Julie stopped right behind him. “Hi, everyone,” she said. Now that she was closer, I could see that she looked a little pale. “Oh, gosh, I need to sit down.”

Jack looked at her with concern. “Go have a seat!” he said urgently. “In fact, go grab something to eat in the kitchen.”

“That’s right, dear,” Sam said. “You’re eating for two, remember.”

Julie shot a small smile at my friends and me. “Sorry to be rude,” she said, “but I think I might take Sam up on that. I’ve been so hungry lately!”

“When are you due?” Bess asked warmly.

“One more month,” Julie said, patting her round belly.

She waved and walked toward the kitchen. I followed her with my eyes and was surprised when I heard harsh voices coming from nearby.

“. . . should’ve planned for her to eat first,” Jack was saying to his father, a sharp edge in his voice. “She’s

eight months pregnant!”

Sam looked hurt. “And nobody minds her sitting down or eating early.”

“Are you sure?” Jack asked in a lower voice, sneering. “You don’t want us out here shaking hands to sell your stupid vegetables?”

Sam’s face drooped even farther. Abby shot Jack a warning look. “Now, Jack . . .”

Holly cleared her throat. She was staring straight ahead, and I couldn’t tell whether she’d heard the argument and was ignoring it, or had really zoned out during the whole thing. “I am getting hungry, Sam,” she said, looking up at him. “And the hall is filling up.”

She gestured around at the other tables. I noted that she was right; while only three or four tables had people sitting at them when we’d arrived, now nearly all of them were populated. They were filled with a combination of men and women, young and old. I found myself feeling hopeful for Sam and Black Creek Farm. It was hard not to be touched by his enthusiasm. I hoped some of these diners would become customers.

Jack shook his head and walked off in the direction of the kitchen, and Sam looked down at us with an awkward smile.

“I should go check with the kitchen,” he said. “Maybe we’re nearly ready to eat.”

He and Abby strode off, and I looked at my friends. George was frowning at Holly.

“That was weird,” she said.

“What?” Holly asked, crinkling her brow like she had no idea what George was referring to.

“You didn’t see that?” Bess asked, her blue eyes widening in surprise. “Jack just got pretty snarky with his dad.”

“Oh, Jack.” Holly rolled her eyes, waving her hand like Jack wasn’t worth worrying about. “He’s just . . . high-strung. He gets like that with everyone.”

Ned shrugged. “Maybe he was just worried about his wife,” he suggested.

“How do you know Julie and Jack?” I asked Holly.

“Oh, we went to high school together,” she replied. “The two of them ended up going to the same college and then settling in Chicago after they got married. It’s great having them back here in River Heights.”

I smiled. “Must be nice to reconnect with old high school friends.”

Holly nodded, then looked over to what I assumed was the kitchen door, where Sam was striding out. “Ooh,” she said, “it looks like Sam is going to speak now. That must mean dinner’s ready.”

I looked toward the podium that had been set up at the front of the room. Sam strode up to it and gently

tapped the mic.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he said, leaning in with a smile. “Welcome to the first annual Black Creek Farm showcase and buffet dinner! I’m so delighted that all of you could be with us tonight, and I can’t wait for you to taste the produce we’re growing organically and sustainably on the farm. I hope many of you will consider joining our CSA. You can grab a brochure with our membership and price info, or just come grab me later! I’d be happy to give you details.”

Then his face became more serious. “Ladies and gentlemen, Black Creek Farm is a dream of mine, but it’s also something I feel very passionate about. A little over a year ago, I was working as a lawyer at a high-powered firm in Chicago. I took on the case of a young man whose wife had died of salmonella poisoning. Do you know what killed her?” He paused, looking around at the crowd. “Spinach,” he said finally.

“That’s right—packaged, washed spinach. You know those salad mixes you see at the grocery store. All this woman had done—she was only twenty-five—was buy and eat some salad. But that salad was poisoned with salmonella, because our food system in this country is broken.”

I glanced at Ned. I expected him to be wearing his detached, skeptical look, but instead he looked stunned and totally absorbed in what Sam was saying. Bess and George seemed enthralled too. And Holly was glancing around at the crowd’s reaction, smiling.

As we watched, Sam went on to recount where salmonella comes from (meat), and how produce becomes tainted with salmonella (through contaminated processing equipment). I had to admit that it was shocking how easily these poisons could make their way into packaged food and how damaging they could be once they were there. But Sam went on to talk about larger problems with big corporate farms: the damage they could do to the environment, and the lack of oversight.

“Not to mention,” he added, “the food doesn’t taste that good. Why would you want to eat a tomato that was picked two weeks ago, barely orange? It’s never going to beat a tomato that ripened in the sun on my farm.”

He paused, clearing his throat. I noticed that there were tears in his eyes. He really cares about what he’s saying, I thought.

“These are issues that affect me deeply,” Sam finished. “So deeply that I gave up my six-figure income and the career I’d worked decades to build, and spent my life’s savings on a little farm just half an hour from here, in Idaville.” He looked up, his gaze moving from table to table. “I can promise you this,” he said. “The food from my farm has been lovingly grown and is delicious and safe for your family to eat.” He smiled. “I hope you all will join me on my quest to make food safer, environmentally responsible—and delicious!”

Sam stepped back from the podium, and the audience erupted into applause. I clapped loudly, glancing at Ned, and saw that he was applauding heartily too. In fact, everyone at our table seemed moved by the speech—even Bess.

When the applause died down, Sam moved back from the podium and Abby scooted in, leaning toward the mic to announce, “You’ll all be happy to know that the food is ready! We’re going to start lining people up to move through the buffet line along the right wall, near the kitchen. Tables one through four, would you like to head over?”

I looked at the number posted in the center of our table: four.

“That’s us!” Bess said, jumping up excitedly. “And not a moment too soon! I could eat a horse.”

Holly laughed. “Um, I don’t think that’s on the menu here, Bess. It’s all vegetarian.”

Bess shrugged. “Then I guess a really big eggplant will have to do.”

My friends and I moved toward the line that was forming near the buffet table, as Holly ran into the kitchen to help a slim Asian girl around my age bring out dishes of food. I felt my stomach growling as I spotted something that looked like pasta pomodoro, some kind of vegetable curry, and . . .

“Oh my gosh,” George whispered in a hiss, and I pulled my eyes from the buffet to follow her concerned glance.

“Ohhh. . . .”

I felt my stomach clench again, this time with concern, as I spotted Julie, Jack’s pregnant wife, stumbling from the kitchen. Her face was slick with perspiration, and she grabbed the door frame to steady herself.

Holly was just coming out of the kitchen with a big basket of bread, and she looked, stunned, at Julie. “Are you okay?” she cried, putting the basket on the floor and leaning closer.

“I don’t think so,” Julie whispered, her words slurring. “I feel . . .”

But before she could finish her sentence, she lost her grip on the door frame and went down—tumbling to the ground and splaying on the floor.

“Oh no!” Holly cried, kneeling and turning Julie over. “Jack! Where are you?!”

I heard running and turned to see Jack sprinting over from a table near the edge of the room. “What’s happened to her?” he yelled. “Call an ambulance!”

Holly dug into her pocket for her phone, and in the confusion, the young girl who’d been helping set up the food ran out of the kitchen and surveyed the scene, her face paling in horror. She turned toward the buffet, where people were eagerly grabbing plates and piling them with vegetables.

“DON’T EAT THE FOOD!” she cried, running over and grabbing the spoons out of people’s hands. “IT’S NOT SAFE!”

## **Users Review**

### **From reader reviews:**

#### **Erica Dennis:**

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